



AMERINDIAN PEOPLES ASSOCIATION

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The APA Has Never Called for a “State within a State” but Instead Respect for Indigenous Rights

Recently and even more than before there has been a spate of letters appearing in the *Guyana Chronicle* leveled at criticizing the work of the Amerindian Peoples Association (APA) and making totally false and malicious statements and assertions about the organisation and its Vice President Tony James. These include ones written by Noel Antone (June 6), Patrick Austin (June 9) and Peter Persaud (June 12). Letters such as those above have been given ready publication by the Chronicle but when the APA has responded to provide the truth, our letters or releases are never published by the paper.

We are not going to repeat the lies of the letter writers, and Mr. Persaud’s letter will be further addressed in another communication, but we wish to inform that Mr. Tony James has long been a defender of the rights of the indigenous peoples of Guyana, continues to do so, and has vowed to continue doing so until the rights of our peoples are fully recognized and respected. About two years ago a set of lies were being told about him and threats were made against his life in attempts to silence him. The recent letters appear to be a resurgence of such actions and the security of his person must be taken seriously, especially that Mr. James has been even more in the forefront of struggles for the recognition of the land rights of the people of the Deep South Rupununi. As a representative of the APA he has criticized the inadequacy of the Amerindian Act in protecting such rights and has sought to ensure the security of the people’s rights to their lands, territories and resources in the face of government-sanctioned mining activities and non-fulfillment of their land rights.

Mr. James is not alone in the struggles in the Deep South as evidenced by the continued actions of the people in the various communities. In May they took action to prevent disruptive mining activities on their traditional lands in a protest action in Lethem. To take such actions and twist them to the extent of labeling them as moves “*to dismember in part the territorial integrity of our sovereign and independent state*” is to tell people that they have no right to protect their lives and livelihoods and if one can say this for the people of the Deep South, one can equally say this for the peoples of the Upper and Middle Mazaruni and in fact all indigenous communities that continue to seek full recognition of their land rights.

The APA wishes to point out that the government is a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and therefore must honour its intentions as agreed to in this Declaration or otherwise be deemed to be a signatory for purposes of tokenism. At no time ever has the APA advocated for a “state within a state” but has instead

sought the ‘recognition of rights of indigenous peoples to their lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied, used or otherwise acquired’ as stated in Article 26 of the Declaration. Further the APA respects Article 46 (1) which states that “Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, people, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act contrary to the Charter of the United Nations or construed as authorizing or encouraging any action which would dismember or impair, totally or in part, the territorial integrity or political unity of sovereign and independent States”.

What is very disquieting and appears to be happening at this time in the Deep South, coincidental or not, is the move by persons to infiltrate communities to sow mistrust among them to the extent of seeking to prevent interaction with each other or with organizations, including the APA. Guyanese in general, but more so indigenous communities must be aware of such actions which have also happened in the past and in which unsuspecting institutions such as the church are used for such purposes. The current writings and parallel actions in communities leave us to wonder, why are the writers trying to drive fear into our peoples and to silence representation? Is this a strategy to isolate our peoples from associating and supporting the APA that has been working continuously with indigenous communities for over two decades? What are their agendas if they are not supporting indigenous rights?

In two of the letters mentioned above, questions are raised about Mr. James’ relationship with a group calling itself the Amerindian Peoples Liberation Front. A quick look into the Facebook page of this group shows a number of postings which mentions Mr. James and the APA. The APA wishes to clarify that Mr. James is not a member of this group and neither is the organisation associated with it. The APA, like Guyana’s constitution, respects a people’s right to organize and to associate but does not support armed or violent action as a means of addressing issues. Beyond what is posted on the internet, the APA does not know anything more about the APLF. The organisation would encourage this group’s leaders and members to come forth and if its mission is to support the rights of the indigenous peoples of this country to do so through a public face.

If the above allegations and opinions were being made at another time and place, they would be deemed downright ridiculous but given the nature of the work and representation of the APA it has become necessary to expose the misinformation and untruths.